

All Aboard!

14 October 2009

The Ashtabula *Star Beacon* carried a report from the Associated Press today noting the number of jobs saved or created by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 in Ohio. That number was only thirteen thousand. More than that has been lost since the Recovery Act's passage into law as the state's unemployment rate climbed from 9.5% in the month of passage to a preliminary number of 10.8% for August. September's data will be released later this month.

A ton of money has been spent. It is uncertain what there is to show for it. In lieu of just criticizing something, alternatives should be presented.

Rather than spending federal dollars on preserving jobs directly, infrastructure development might have helped better. The concept of the "bedroom community" is growing where people commute long distances from their home to their workplace. Ashtabula and Lake counties in northeast Ohio are prime examples of that in providing bedroom communities to the Cleveland metro area. Previously when our western engineer lived in Ashtabula County he routinely did round-trips to work on Cleveland's west side in excess of one hundred miles per day. He was not alone in doing this.

Along the way between Ohio's geographically largest county and its closest urban metro there is already one AMTRAK route that runs in the wee hours of the night. I myself have ridden those rails to and from conferences in Detroit as well as returning home for Thanksgiving from undergraduate studies. There is no station any more in Ashtabula County and the next closest stations are in Cleveland and then over the state line in Pennsylvania on Peach Street in Erie. A mass transit infrastructure is there and with some small modifications could be linked into the Greater Cleveland Rapid Transit Authority's network which itself already links to Cleveland Hopkins International Airport.

Something better that funds could have been directed to that would have helped promote fuel conservation, greenhouse gas reduction, and more would have been to instead build up commuter service on the rail. Auto insurance costs alone from the hazards of winter driving in northeast Ohio would go down if those commuting from bedroom communities to Cleveland instead were on a train. The amount of fuel expended in commuting is greater in the winter as more parts of the vehicle have to operate compared to the summer months. The rock salt mix used on icy roads also causes enough corrosion on vehicles that the average life of an automobile before requiring replacement runs about three to five years. Between the hazards of driving in snow and the chance of deer strike, the potential for calamity would go down if a mass transit option for commuting were in play. Such would also create positions through creating rail stations and perhaps park & ride facilities to serve commuters. Conditions elsewhere along the rails could potentially also allow for such to be tried in other communities.

Why does this matter in the library setting? By and large, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 does nothing to directly help libraries. Libraries exist through the ability of patrons to be able to pay taxes for the upkeep of the libraries. In bedroom communities, the labor expended for wages does not happen locally but those wages are brought back to the community. Making it possible to have an economic base for a community to exist remains a prerequisite for a library to even be possible.

While scattered reports indicated that most of the jobs saved by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 were in K-12 education, there is more to life than the classroom. A tax base made up of mostly teachers is not a stable economic setting for trying to keep a library open. Since teacher pay comes out of taxes too, the

question then becomes who was shaken down to get *that* money. Simple infrastructure upgrades, whether in improving mass transit or otherwise reducing a community's cost of living, might have the greater potential to lift economic baselines that make keeping library doors open possible.



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